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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the implementation of a graduate preservice teacher education course, entitled "Language and Meaning," offered via an interactive two-way audio and video delivery system in which participants on two campuses of Pace University (Westchester and New York City) were able to view each other. An interactive World Wide Web site was also set up to facilitate communication among the students. Except for one student, all reported positive feelings about having been involved in a distance learning situation, though more than two-thirds of the students did not feel that it was something that they would like to use in their teaching. Analysis of the formative and summative data gathered from the participants revealed key themes and issues, including: the need for interaction among students; the need for student-teacher interaction; the impact of interactive Web sites in education; and the role of reflection on one's learning. (AEF)

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Multiple Perceptions and Perspectives: Faculty/Students' Responses to Distance Learning

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Technology has dramatically changed the way people interact and communicate. Many educators have readily embraced the idea that technology will, to varying degrees, alter their teaching. Technology lets educators explore multiple delivery systems and varying means of communication between teachers and students. Research conducted during the past five decades found no significant difference in instruction offered in traditional classroom contexts and those offere by forms of remote transmission such as television (Russell, 1992).

The use of technological advances has been an easy accommodation for some educators. For others, this has not been the case. Any change or paradigm shift comes with attendant concerns and frustrations thus it is necessary for educators to look closely at the process as we engage in varying delivery and communication systems. Reflection on the teaching/learning process, then, is crucial. Richardson (1990), in calling for an "individualistic, psychoanalytic approach" to teacher education, recognizes that lack of reflection leads to "an idiosyncratic view of teachers. That is, the teacher teaches as he or she is. How then, are we to think about affecting change?"(p.13). In order to facilitate such change, reflection was an integral part of the course.

In Psychology of Personal Constructs, Kelly (1955) notes that people use experience to create constructs through which they create new experiences and then verify or modify other experiences. We build each experience, then, upon experiences that are, in turn, modified through future experiences. This process is one in which we view the participants as "explorers" investigating their own historical landscapes (Pope and Keen, 1981). Through this exploration of self and one's educative experiences, the educational context and perspective continually evolve. Kelly refers to this "permeability of constructs" as the working through ideas not rigidly held but open to change through new experiences.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were all pre-service graduate teacher education students at a large urban university. The participants were enrolled in a degree program leading to a Master's of Arts in Teaching. All of the students were "career-changers" who, after several years in various professions, were now pursuing careers in teaching. Formative and summative qualitative data was gathered on the expectations, experiences and impact of the distance learning component of this course on the participants.

Context

The University has several campuses within a forty-mile distance of each other. I was scheduled to teach a course entitled "Language and Meaning" during a six-week summer session on one of the University's campuses in Westchester, a suburb of New York City. Approximately two months before the beginning of the course, six students from the New York City campus requested that this course be offered on their campus too. Due to many factors, this was not possible. In trying to accommodate these six students, the idea of teaching the course via synchronous distance learning technology was borne.

When I was asked to consider this prospect, I was intrigued. I have always been interested in technology, and I try to be innovative in my teaching. Nevertheless, here I was, a relative newcomer to the University, teaching a new course for the first time, considering embarking on this new adventure. As a teacher educator, I felt that it was important to take risks and try new teaching strategies, and I believe that technology, increasingly, will play a role in the lives of my students, all of whom are future teachers. Knowing very little about the "mechanics" of distance learning, I agreed with the proviso that the New York City students would agree to meet with me at least twice during the six-week course.

Implementation and Discussion

The course was offered via an interactive two-way audio and video delivery system in which participants on each campus were able to view each other. I taught the course on-site in Westchester with real-time transmission to the New York City campus. I also set up an interactive web site in

the hope that this would facilitate communication between and among the students (Rhodes and Flank, 1998).

On the first day of class, I explained to the Westchester group what we were doing and why. The New York City group which had grown to ten students, knew about the distance learning situation. Many students in the Westchester group were uncomfortable with the prospect. They were concerned, confused and worried that they would not learn. We spent a great deal of time talking about the logistics of the course and the concerns of the students. We talked extensively about technology and its role in teaching and how this course could provide a demonstration of such a teaching/learning situation. We talked about taking risks as teachers and as learners. The students in New York City were much more comfortable with the situation, apparently recognizing that this was done to accommodate them. Three of the Westchester students seemed resentful and said that they might not have registered for the course if they knew that it was being offered this way. Although they were assured that they could drop the course with no penalty, they ultimately decided not to.

Initially, there were some problems with the transmission across locations. Initially there often seemed to be too much "down time" because the technological glitches interfered with the normal flow of a traditional class. Students at the remote site could not see things written on the chalkboard. Sometimes students could not hear each other. We forged on though. The interactive web site was active but only five students logged on during the first week.

Since this was a course for future teachers, we decided to focus not only on the content of the course but also on the process of being engaged in this distance learning situation. We explored the research on teachers as reflective practitioners as we navigated through the course. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences. I did too. After the first class I wrote:

I wonder about this experience . . . how will I ever manage this situation. I pride myself on knowing my students, but how am I ever going to get to know the NY group. They seem so remote— they are! This may not work for me. I've got to find a way to acclimate myself and my students. While I understand their discomfort, I hope that they realize that this will be a valid educational experience. Why are the Westchester students so uncomfortable? We've got to talk about this and relate it to their future professional lives. They too will be confronted with students who are angry or resentful or merely afraid. They need to see that this can be a great experience and their struggles will help them better define themselves as teachers. I need to help them.

After our second class, Kathryn and Paul, both Westchester students, decided to write their reflections on the web site rather than on paper. Most of the New York students discussed their feelings of being in a University setting which clearly was responsive to students' needs. During this first week, none of the New York students focused on the content of the course or on the technological aspects of the course.

Honestly, I wasn't sure after the first class, whether I would like the distance component to the class. I'm still not convinced but I think that this class went smoother and I don't feel as much like I'm going to miss out on the content because of the technology. I couldn't imagine myself taking a class by distance learning. As discussed at the end of the class, I feel that both the students and the teacher lose the personal contact and body language which I feel is invaluable in communication. I can see the value in a distance learning class, but I hope that it is not the wave of the future. (Kathryn-Westchester)

The jury is still out on the conferencing between the two campuses. So far it has worked out well for me, but I'm assuming that is because I'm in the class with the teacher. I feel strongly that conferencing is not the way to go in Education. There is just too much that students and teachers miss out on when they are not in the same room. How can we pick up on the body language? (Paul-Westchester)

By the second week of the course, we all became a bit more comfortable with the distance aspects of the course. Interestingly, some issues that arose out of the technological inclusions were interspersed within the course content. Students pondered language and meaning in varying contexts. They looked at various forms of communication, they questioned how people construct meaning and as they began to use the web site more, they pondered whether written communication was more meaningful than verbal communication. Often, the dilemmas posed by the technology formed the impetus for closer connections to the content of the course. The students began to look at the course as teachers rather than just as learners.

From a Westchester point of view, this is an interesting experiment to be a part of. I do not mind being a guinea pig from this perspective, and can personally put up with anything for a worthwhile common good. However, I still "feel sorry" for the NY people. I do not think they will get as much out of this class. I view them as "passive learners" - just like kids watching TV vs. being in a real hands-on learning situation with interpersonal feedback. They are listening, but are they tuned into the dynamic professor? They are not voluntarily responding, only responding when directly asked questions. It will be interesting to see if they become more active participants as the class progresses or not. Then again, maybe the NY people are happy being in a passive situation, where demands to participate are psychologically less, because they do not have the physical presence of the professor or eye contact with the prof to prompt them to respond. Some of them might be content

just sitting there anonymously, soaking up what information they choose. Others might be frustrated, but not express it, because they chose to be a part of this experiment and have put their money on the line to take this course. Also, some of them may not be responding, because they simply feel very self-conscious being on the TV screen or talking into the microphone, just as many people do not like their picture taken or voice recorded (Nadine-Westchester).

Just a few comments about the video hook up system we're using. It seems to force us to engage in "report talk" rather than "rapport talk" more typical of other classrooms. Sometimes it feels like I'm speaking over the PA system at Yankee Stadium. In N.Y., the fact that we each have to find the microphone, then turn it on, then interrupt the discussion in Westchester of course limits the spontaneity of our comments. As for the web site, this is a first for me. My initial thought as I sit here typing with one finger (typing is another of many skills that I don't have), is "What kind of communication is this?" I'm not talking- if I decide I don't like what I'm typing in, I can just change it before I send it, or can decide not to send it at all. So, there is not the spontaneity of speech, whether formal or informal. While I certainly don't feel the rigidity of paper-writing, I am aware of a permanence to the written word that isn't there with oral speech. I suppose this is somewhat like the long-lost art of letter-writing. There's an odd feeling of "Who is the audience?" When I talk, I know who I'm talking to and when I write I know who I'm writing for. Now, I'm just sort of writing to an uncertain audience; perhaps one or two, all or none of my classmates will read this, today, tomorrow, next week or never (Perry-NY).

I was feeling much more comfortable. The students were engaged in thoughtful discussions and we were better able to communicate across campuses. But, as I read Nadine's and other Westchester students' reflections, I realized that many of them were trying to figure out what it might be like to be on the receiving, rather than broadcast sight. I decided that experiencing both situations was important for them and I arranged to switch sites and broadcast from New York rather than Westchester. Again, the Westchester students expressed concern. However, we were able to discuss how this would enable them to more clearly see some pedagogical issues and more closely identify with their NY classmates. I ultimately taught on-site from New York three times during the six-week course.

It will be interesting to see the participation level of the NYers vs. the Westchester people, on the evening(s) when the roles are reversed. I believe youngsters, in general, especially those in grades K-8 would have less trouble and even eagerly embrace the concept of long-distance learning more readily than adults. These kids have grown up in a technology age (Diane-Westchester).

I happen to be enjoying this class very much. However, when you made the visit to the New York Campus for the day, I felt as if you were not part of the class or our professor. During that session the class seemed to be longer, more drawn out, and our attention spans were far less than the regular classes that occur with you present. As a result, I am very glad that I am on the Westchester campus, and I do feel for those on the New York campus, because I can understand how they can become annoyed when they cannot intervene on the spot, instead they have to pause and wait for the microphone, or if they cannot interact as they would like to. This class is one of a lot of action. (Shelly-Westchester)

As some of us anticipated, the unanimous feeling in Westchester was that we did not enjoy being on the opposite end of the camera and microphone. The consensus was that this was interesting to witness on a one-time basis, but "we want Carole back."(Nadine-Westchester)

I happened to enjoy the broadcast from the Big Apple. I was glad to get a chance to see it from "the other point of view." I know that some of you aren't comfortable with it but I think this experience is a valuable lesson that can be utilized in many ways. One thing I think we all should work on is giving NYC a chance to speak more. I commiserate with you all in NY regarding the "back burner" feeling that is sometimes felt while being on the receiving end. (Rick-Westchester)

As the semester progressed, the technological aspects of the course became secondary. Seven of the students from both campuses decided that they too, wanted to switch sites occasionally. They felt that they wanted to more fully engage in the experience and they also wanted to get to know their classmates more. We added a telephone linkup and were able to do inter-campus group work. With the exception of one student, ironically a New Yorker, all seemed to be at ease with the remote transmission and were readily able to move beyond the technology and focus more deeply on the content. By the fifth session, students on-line comments rarely dealt with issues of technology and mostly dealt with content specific issues. I wrote:

It feels like it's all coming together. The content of the course has always been intact, but the polarity of the two sites seems to be diminishing. People on both campuses have fused into one class. There is a cohesiveness, a bonding.

The students continually reflected on their experiences, focusing on themselves as learners and as future teachers. Except for one NY campus student, all reported positive feelings about having been involved in a distance learning situation, though more than two-thirds of the students did not feel that it was something that they would like to use in their teaching.

I do appreciate the opportunity of being in this class and experiencing distance learning first hand. I have become much more comfortable on the Internet and have gotten to know people on two campuses. The course stands

as a lesson to us all and I think we are all better for having been a part of it. (Alice-Westchester)

As part of their final project, the students were asked to reply to the topic "Where I was, where I am now?" Perry's reflections parallel those of most of the participants:

My final thoughts about distance learning: On the first night I was skeptical and considered surrendering, but I'm glad I hung in there. It was indeed an interesting experience. It remains undoubtedly preferable to be on site with the teacher. Because it extends a course's reach, allowing students to take those they otherwise might not be able to take, it's a positive development. It should lend itself well to lecture courses, not interactive courses like ours. Where am I? Much more enthused about technology and much less scared of it.

On the last night of class, we all met in a restaurant midway between both campuses. While several students had transversed campuses and therefore met each other, many of them had not. Over dinner, the conversations centered on typical topics, but interspersed were discussions of connecting with a teacher, limitations of technology, teaching and learning and the desire to continue to relate to each other.

Conclusions

Analysis of the formative and summative data gathered from the participants reveals key themes and issues including: the need for interaction among students; the need for student-teacher interaction, pedagogical concerns of distance learning courses; the impact of interactive-web sites in education and the role of reflection on one's learning.

Overall, most of the students indicated that they had never reflected on their own educative experiences. They noted that while doing so now, they learned about themselves in ways they had not thought about before. Most of the participants noted increased self-understanding. Many participants noted that they were better able to get in touch with their own learning processes.

One outcome of this research is to encourage teachers to reflect on their educative experiences as a way of better understanding their classroom practices. A second outcome is the generation of questions about the effective incorporation of distance learning.

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